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ABSTRACT

The use of multiple indicators of educational achievement is called for to replace a single measure of student achievement in order to identify the school context in which education occurs. School-level indicators have been identified, such as access to knowledge, press for achievement, and professional teaching conditions. These indicators are vital in understanding the context of schooling and in influencing the outcomes of the educational process. The school indicators, however, do not provide the interpretive frame necessary for understanding schooling within the context of the community. In rural communities, where resources are often more limited and where schools are central to social and cultural activities, community context is vital in understanding and influencing school indicators. As federal and state assessment of school achievement is moving toward the creation of such school-level indicators, rural schools and communities face the choice of being compared to the urban context or developing additional indicators that capture the rural context. Rural schools seem to be influenced more by the economic and cultural outlooks of their communities than are other schools. Student, family, and community socioeconomic characteristics and attitudes are major determinants of educational achievement. More research is necessary to determine what makes up an effective rural school and the community context in which such schools operate. (ALL)

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Indicators of the Rural Community Context: A Missing Component of Educational Indicators

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Indicators of the Rural Community Context:
A Missing Component of Educational Indicators.

The use of multiple indicators of educational achievement is being called for to replace a single measure of the outcome of student achievement. These indicators are potentially of more use to educators and policy makers than an outcome measure because they can identify the school context in which education occurs. It is, after all, the school context that educators and policy makers seek to influence.

Jeannie Oakes (1989) has identified three (3) composite school-level indicators. These composites and some indicators are:

1. Access to knowledge: instructional time, course offerings, materials, etc.
2. Press for achievement: graduation requirements, academic expectations, quality and type of homework, etc.
3. Professional Teaching Conditions: class size, teacher autonomy, clerical support, etc.

These indicators (29 in all) are vital in understanding the context of schooling and in influencing the outcomes of the educational process. They are of interest to educators and policy makers, and are useful in monitoring both resource allocation and product evaluation.

They do not, however, provide the interpretive frame necessary for understanding schooling within the context of the community. In rural communities, where resources are often more limited and where schools are central to social/cultural activities, community context is vital to understand (and influence) these indicators.

Because, as Oakes notes, federal and state assessment of school achievement is moving toward the creation of such indicators, rural schools and communities face the choice of being compared to the urban context or of developing indicators which accurately reflect rural communities. I propose to create an interactive format in which we examine the community indicators of school success. Such a format presents the opportunity for practitioners and researchers in rural schooling to identify and refine indicators which accurately describe rural communities.

Federal statistics reveal that some 59.5 million Americans live outside designated urban areas of the United States. That is, they reside in the open countryside or in communities of less than 2500 people (Barker, 1986). Therefore, rural schools' most distinguishing features continue to be their small size and spatial isolation. Another characteristic that is associated with rural schools is their lower test scores and lower success rates of producing students that have achieved after completing high school.

A new perspective on education is that of the effective school. Buttram and Carson (cited in Hobbs, 1988) have stated that effective schools are: 1) orderly, safe and attractive climate; 2) a clear mission with a consensus on school goals, teacher objectives and priorities; 3) strong instructional leadership by the principal; 4) high expectations for student achievement which are clearly communicated to students; 5) instruction for most of the school day; 6) and evaluation system for progress for student progress, the staff and the

school itself, and 7) supportive home/school relations. However, characteristics and demographics of rural schools are different from urban schools from which these studies were conducted. Therefore, we know little about effective rural schools. How are they organized? How do they operate? What characteristics do they share with effective urban schools?

Programs have been implemented into rural areas to help alleviate the problems that rural areas often face such as an adequate number of teachers, qualified administration, and educational materials. For example, Iowa currently uses a series of per-pupil bonuses in its state-aid formula to encourage whole-grade sharing, administrative sharing, and program sharing. Communities will sometimes sign an agreement to move an entire junior high school to a neighboring town or to move an entire high school student body. Iowa districts have been sharing 12 superintendents. Sharing has allowed school districts to offer advanced foreign language or math courses when they would not have had a qualified teacher or enough students to have done so on their own. Most of these sharing agreements are reversible if the patrons choose (Pipho, 1987).

Other options that are available to serve students better, in small rural schools are: telecommunications technology; install interactive videodisc technology and computer-assisted instruction; schedule school day, seek, and/or semester flexibility; match class size with instructional mode; share staff and instructional resources with other schools and districts; employ part-time instructional staff; differentiate staff roles; use volunteers to instruct and provide other services; integrate the curriculum; use an outcome-based curriculum; employ school-based enterprises; and coordinate social services, getting other agencies to provide school-based social services (Forbes, 1990).

Although these resources and options have been successful and are favorable options, we must consider our audience. Rural areas have many characteristics in common, but they can also be very different. A rural area in the Plains States is strongly committed to local control, those in the Southeast have centralized control at the state-department level. Rural areas have suffered a decline in their tax base due to the decline in agriculture and local industry such as coal mining. However, each rural district's situation creates challenges that are different. For example, an expansion of learning opportunities presents very small schools in Plains and Northwest with a different set of problems from those faced by the relatively few small schools in the Southeast (Forbes, 1990).

Educators in the rural areas are aware of options that are available to assist their students but they are then faced with the problem of how to acquire the resources to administer the programs. Telecommunications requires a dependable phone system. Sharing teachers and administrators requires travel funds. Some areas are too isolated to make program, faculty, and student exchanges feasible.

Rural schools seem to be influenced more by the economic and cultural outlooks of their communities than are other schools. Hobbs (1988) relates well the school and community when he notes:

> . . . research evidence shows clearly that credit or blame for academic performance should be shared with the family and community. Student, family and community socioeconomic characteristics and attitudes are major determinants of educational achievement. (p. 24)

Mote (1986) exemplifies this relationship when he notes:

> Rural and disadvantaged youth tend to make early job choices. Emphasis on the future may force a career decision before a person is developmentally able to make a wise choice. (p. 3)

But how do we begin to link community indicators to indicators of school success? For example, we could perhaps locate an effective rural school in an area of low SES, low educational attainment, and high unemployment. What community indicator would tell us this would be an effective school? a successful school? Is a school that provides activities for students before-after school hours more successful than one that does not?

There are, of course, standards which are established as measures of success. Meeting such standards can result in accreditation (Hare, 1990), but the questions becomes does meeting a state standard ensure a successful program? Does failure to meet such a standard indicate an unsuccessful program? As Stephens (1988) notes in his concerns of translating a measure of quality into an operational standard, the objective is a translation "that reflect(s) the contextual realities of a rural small school district" (p. 14).

Though he is not speaking directly to our concern for rural schools, Odden (1990), in his discussion of the need for analysis in use of educational indicators, does sum well our dilemma.

> Given these cross-cutting pressures, many of which are likely to taint analytic and sense-making conclusions, the critical issue that emerges is how to maintain the integrity, quality, and neutrality of the analysis that needs to accompany indicator systems, as these are critical ingredients of education indicator reports. Put differently, who can provide high quality, substantively sound and neutral analysis of the relationships among the input, process, and outcome variables in an education indicator system, set those analyses with in a policy context, and make recommendations on future policy directions? There is no simple answer to this question. (p. 29)

Historical Indicators of Schools and Communities

SCHOOLS

segregation/desegregation/resegregation over time
school organization changes (Black High School becomes consolidated Jr Hi)
parent participation in PTOs, etc
teacher careers mobility, status, etc
reputation academic, athletic, (state 'report cards', test scores, local newspapers)
visibility high profile, much publicity, easy to find
extra-curricular activities clubs, trips,
graduates rate, after graduation, college attendance, role in community
use of facilities after-school-programs, sports programs, adult literacy, community dinners, library, gym,
church support
student participation in community service projects, visits, work-study,

COMMUNITIES

key people in community teachers, administrators, community school graduates,
history when founded, by whom, why,
reputation myth, fact, other local newspapers,
school board elected or appointed, key community personnel,
school advisory board key community personnel
adopt-a-school business participation
participation in school community projects in/at the school
curriculum community projects as school curriculum (drug-free, self-esteem)
other educational opportunities vo-tech, community college,
income by race over time
racial composition over time
composition of head-of-household over time
unemployment
literacy
% of community employment controlled by school (teachers, bus drivers, custodial, purchasing contracts,)

(Hare & Noblit, 1990)

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